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Cultural transfer in reading groups: From theory to practice and back

Jeanette den Toonder*, Saskia Visser and Sandra van Voorst – *University of Groningen*

Abstract

People who discuss books in reading groups are playing a role in transferring cultural values, norms and ideas about themes present in the literature they read. How this cultural transfer takes place, and in which ways the process can be enhanced, has to date not been examined. Therefore, the University of Groningen, the Netherlands collaborated with two public libraries and a community organization to set up a research project addressing different aspects of the process from inside reading groups. The results imply that readers who are focusing on reflection and interpretation of literature play an important role in cultural transfer, which can be assisted by the use of reading guides. The collaboration between scholars and non-academic partners proved fruitful in co-creating knowledge that can be used in further research and to improve service to reading groups.

Keywords: community-based research; cultural transfer; literary competence; reading groups; reading guides

Key messages

- Collaboration between scholars in literary studies and professionals and other non-academic partners proved fruitful in co-creating knowledge.
- By participating in discussions in literary reading groups, the reader is an active participant in the process of cultural transfer.
- Understanding readers' wishes and expectations allows the improvement of tools that help to generate successful cultural transfer, such as reading guides.

Introduction

A rapidly developing media culture and the omnipresence of visual modes of expression in today's digitized society have caused anxiety among advocates of the written literary text (see, for example, Cox, 1998; Salwak, 1999). In 'The last reader', for example, a Dutch newspaper article published in February 2014, Christiaan Weijs considers the liquidation of a chain bookshop, the merger of publishing houses and the closure of libraries in the Netherlands as symptomatic of a declining reading culture and the disappearance of the reader. Our research project opposes this view by considering the reader as an active participant in the process of cultural transfer. To date, the study of cultural transfer within the literary domain has mainly focused on questions regarding the cultural transfer in and through literary works: how do literary texts transfer cultural

values, norms and ideas to their audience? By participating in discussions in literary reading groups, the reader also plays a significant role in this particular form of cultural transfer. The readers' dynamic contribution to the exchange of cultural and societal perceptions and thoughts is the guiding principle of our project, in which reading practices are viewed as a form of cultural transfer. The project therefore focuses on the interactive dimension in cultural production by examining the theory of cultural transfer in relation to its practice in reading groups, and aims at improving tools generating successful cultural transfer in these groups.

Recent studies have also insisted on the transformation of reading culture, rather than its vanishing. In *Reading beyond the Book*, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo discuss the success of televised and online book groups, and the role of institutions and mass media in the production of contemporary meanings of reading. Their research on shared reading illustrates that reading groups fulfil an important communal, communicative and cultural role in today's society. Indeed, reading is 'an interactive pleasure' (Hartley, 2001: 127) rather than a solitary activity, and very much in correspondence with mass media developments and the ever-growing access to online sources of information, which readers are happy to share and to discuss. Elizabeth Long argues that 'the ideology of the solitary reader' has for a long time suppressed the recognition of 'the infrastructure of literacy' (Long, 2003: 11), which, in her view, illustrates the clear distinction between culture on the one hand, and society on the other. In *Book Clubs*, therefore, she examines the social role of reading in relation to culture by studying women's reading groups from the nineteenth century onwards and concludes that collective conversations in reading groups are a form of cultural production that help us to understand 'people's interactions with culture' (221). The dialectic between culture and social actions is also explored in Jenny Hartley's *Reading Groups*, in which 350 reading groups in the United Kingdom were asked to participate in a questionnaire about the characteristics of their groups, but also about 'what [they] read, how they choose, and how they structure their discussions' (Hartley, 2001: viii).

In connection with the proposed methodologies and questions raised in these and other studies concerning reading culture, our research focuses on the role and function of reading groups in the Netherlands. The innovative element of our project is the collaboration with three public partners. Our community-based research project is based on the initial cooperation between the Science Shop 'Language, Culture and Communication' of the University of Groningen and Stichting Senia, an organization of volunteers operating on a national level in order to assemble readers with a common cultural interest in reading groups. This organization consists of 880 reading groups focusing on Dutch, English, French and German literature, but also on fields such as history and philosophy. Senia supports these reading groups by offering a selection of titles, as well as background information and material for discussion in the form of reading guides. Since 2010, a number of reading guides have been prepared each year by students of the University of Groningen. This cooperative work was further developed in 2012, when master's degree students examined the reading guides at the request of Senia, who were committed to improving the material offered to reading groups. These master's thesis projects were the starting point for a fruitful collaboration between scholars in literary studies and professionals interested in determining the needs of reading groups and the optimization of the reading guides. This resulted in an expanded project in which two more partners were willing to participate, two groups of libraries, consisting of 20 libraries in total, offering facilities to reading groups and particularly interested in the role of the reader in the process of cultural transfer.

The participation of the partners as intermediaries between the researchers and the readers was imperative for the realization of the project.

The common interests of academic researchers and public partners were developed in a research proposal submitted within the framework of an Added Value Research Grant, offered by the Dutch organization for scientific research (NWO), favouring the collaboration between researchers and non-academic partners and aiming to promote the societal impact of academic research. The project 'Shared Literature: Cultural transfer in and through reading groups' was awarded the grant, and was carried out in 2014 and 2015. It offered the researchers direct access to a large and motivated reader audience and the possibility to carry out fieldwork on an extensive scale. The collaboration also proved fruitful to the public partners, as the theoretical framework developed on a literary-critical level could be translated into a practical tool by the partners to assist in the selection of titles and the improvement of reading guides. Furthermore, reading groups form an important section of the public libraries' clientele, and the partners were therefore interested in ways of improving their service and attracting new readers. Within our project, students have conducted various surveys responding to these needs, considering subjects such as the role of literary events oriented towards a broad audience, the existence and development of reading groups organized by individual readers that are not related to cultural institutions and the organization of reading groups in Dutch prisons. These projects have also proven valuable for the partners. This article is confined to reading guides, which are an essential tool in fostering cultural transfer among the readers, and which therefore are at the centre of our attention. The partnership has enabled a better understanding of the readership's wishes and expectations, and has brought about further development and improvement of the content of these reading guides.

Box 1: What are Science Shops?

Science Shops seek to link community needs with students' research. They exist all over the world in different forms and sometimes using different names. Most Science Shops are linked to a university. At the University of Groningen, six Science Shops are placed in different faculties, with easy access for students and supervisors. The Science Shop 'Language, Culture and Communication' also works with organizations and students on themes such as: health communication, minorities and multilingualism, language learning, dyslexia, communication and low literacy. The approach that is usually taken is:

- societal organizations or community groups approach the Science Shop with questions
- the Science Shop looks for appropriate students and supervisors
- the students work in partnership with the societal organizations on the research
- results are discussed with the partners and sometimes transformed for practical use together
- all research is made available for others by open access.

More information is available at: www.rug.nl/society-business/science-shops/taal-cultuur-en-communicatie/publicaties/gedeelde-literatuur. Interested partners are invited to contact the Science Shop at tawi@rug.nl.

The focus of our project is on a specific section within the reading guides – the questions for discussion, because they particularly stimulate reflection and exchange of ideas in the reading groups and offer the foundation for cultural transfer. By further

discussing the results of the different case studies carried out by academic staff and students with the library staff and Senia's volunteers, the relationship between theory and practice becomes a reciprocal one, as feedback from the public partners will be addressed in future research, and improvements will be made to the tools generating successful cultural transfer in reading groups. In this article, we propose to address the relationship between theory and practice by examining the theory of cultural transfer in relation to its practice in reading groups. In order to participate actively in a reading group, and to interpret literary texts of various levels of difficulty, certain skills are essential. One of the skills that our project focuses on is literary competence.

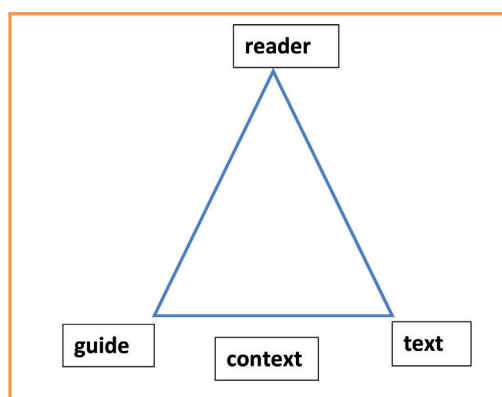
Literary competence

Every season, Senia offers its reading groups a selection of titles: the book list. The books are of a certain literary standard, and so members of the reading groups must have some knowledge of literary conventions in order to read these literary novels. Literary competence is taken to mean the reader's knowledge, skills and experience of reading and his/her attitude to literature: a willingness to make an effort to read a difficult book and to be receptive to unfamiliar perspectives and reference frameworks.

Literary competence is not the same for all readers. Some readers may recognize a reference to a classic novel, while others may not. So the ways in which readers interpret a narrative text differ. In addition, books have their own level of literary competence, which readers must comply with in order to understand and appreciate the meaning of the novel. It is obviously important to try to match the competence levels of the reader and the book. An inappropriate match between reader and book can be very frustrating. There is little point in saddling a novice reader with classics such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*; if the reader does not enjoy reading, he/she will simply become annoyed and frustrated.

Readers participating in reading groups often express the view that they do not wish to become academic readers, but that they are interested in enriching their reading of a book and extending their interpretation of it. One way of bridging the gap between the complexity of a literary novel and the members of the reading group is to write a reading guide that provides pointers and background information to each literary work. The guides that Senia supplies with its novels are usually composed as follows: a short summary of the plot, an interpretation (structure, theme, motives, perspective from which the book was written, characters, style and so on), reviews, information about the author and recommendations for further reading. A section of 20 or so set questions is an important part of the guide. The questions are designed to initiate lively discussions among the members of a reading group about the content and style of the books they read.

Senia asked researchers at the University of Groningen to find out how the reading guides work in practice, and whether they could be improved and optimized. The request corresponded with the hypothesis that the researchers had developed on cultural transfer: optimum cultural transfer will only be achieved in a reading group if all the components match: the novel under discussion, the information and discussion questions in the guide, the readers' style of reading and the way in which the novel is discussed during a reading-group meeting. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Relationship between reader, text and reading guide**Box 2: Societal partner: Stichting Senia**

Stichting Senia started as a personal initiative of senior citizens in 2004 to organize meaningful activities for this age group. Very soon they concentrated mainly on setting up and supporting reading groups. From 2008 to 2010, Stichting Senia received financial support from a societal fund in order to form a solid organization. After this period, the organization grew further and has become self-supporting.

Now 80 volunteers work as ambassadors and members of work groups to support 880 reading groups all over the Netherlands. Senia reading groups pay a small membership fee, and in return they receive a selection of titles and reading guides, and they can participate in excursions and events.

The reading groups organize their group meetings independently. The majority of the more than 5,000 Senia members are senior citizens, females and higher educated (but often not academics). In groups that read non-fiction (history and philosophy), more men participate. Reasons for participation include to enjoy reading and discussing books, to increase one's social network and to learn something.

Reasons for participation: Stichting Senia participated in the project because they wish to gain insight into the practices and requirements of their reading groups in order to improve their service to their members.

Cultural transfer

To address Senia's request to analyse this cultural transfer between book, reader and reading guide in the book groups, we referred to the method and reading levels put forward by Theo Witte (2008). His PhD thesis *Het oog van de meester* ('The Master's Eye') is about teaching literature in the second phase of higher secondary education, and the instrument he established was meant to help students develop higher levels of competence. In the case of reading groups, readers do not necessarily strive to achieve a higher level of competence. Many readers choose to read a book in the way in which they appreciate it. Through this collaborative research, the scholars noticed that a model without a hierarchical implication is more suitable for describing the ways in which readers discuss a book, and this added to the theoretical framework. Witte defines literary competence through six different ways of talking about a book,

from a personal, so-called 'entertaining' way, to a more distanced, contemplative way. People read in a variety of ways, for which Witte's model offers some helpful distinctions. Table 1 shows levels 1 to 6.

Table 1: Development model of literary competence

Competence	1	2	3	4	5	6
Reading level	experiential, entertainment	identifying, recognition	reflective	interpretative	literary	academic, literary critical
Response	subjective, sympathy	subjective, sympathy	subjective/objective	objective, abstract	objective, abstract	autonomous extrapolating
Interaction reader/text/context	closed	passive	interactive	open	open+	metaposition
Literature – opinions + reading motives	pragmatic, amusement	affirming, mimesis	cognitive, growth	cognitive, aesthetic	aesthetic, cultural	constructivist
Appreciation	pragmatic, emotive	realistic	cognitive, moral	structural, aesthetic	aesthetic, cultural	innovative

Source: Derived and adapted from Witte (2008: 31)

So the interaction between reader, novel and guide can differ. A reader can read mainly for entertainment (Level 1) or want to read a fairly easy text for recognition (Level 2). Other ways to read are when readers actively concentrate on the message contained in the text (Level 3: reflective), and when they see the text as an exercise in active exploration (Level 4: interpretative). The most complex interaction between reader and text is when a literary approach, focusing on style and intertextual relations between texts (Level 5) or a literary-critical approach (Level 6) is required of readers.

Reflective and interpretative reading are presumably the best ways for effecting cultural transfer and discussions in reading groups, as they encourage discussion and exchange of ideas. Focus on literary aspects also offers opportunities, but presumes that readers have a literary education, which is not always the case. Cultural transfer may also take place through identifying reading (Level 2), if readers share personal experiences when discussing a book.

From using to improving the reading guides

In 2012, a number of students conducted specific research into the use of reading guides in reading groups (Leeuwerik, 2012; Boer, 2012). They examined the relationship between the readers, the book they discussed and the guides for two selected books, hoping to learn more about the effectiveness of the reading guides. The better that these three factors match, the more the subsequent discussion of the book is likely to fit the readers' needs and interests. The relationship is most effective when both the reader and the guide make use of the reading level (or levels) that are most appropriate to the book in question. An initial comparison of books and reading guides showed that not all the discussion questions proposed by the guides matched the reading level (or levels) appropriate to the book.

The researchers then attended a number of reading-group meetings to observe how the reading guides were used in practice, and to ask members what they thought of them. Understanding how these reading groups usually work turned out to be important. Practices can obviously vary between reading groups. For example, do they use the reading guide, is there a discussion leader and what is his or her role, are there any ingrained customs, how do the members interact and do they have a format for their discussions? While observing and analysing, it was also important to keep sight of the focus of the research: if the book and the reading guide were based on the same reading level, there was a direct link between the reading level and the way in which a reading group discussed a book. If the level of the book and reading guide did not match, the researchers had to examine the implications for the reading level of the readers and the discussions at the meeting, and therefore for cultural transfer within the reading group.

The reading guides and discussion questions appear to form an important guide for the discussions. Nearly all the reading groups in the study made intensive use of the guides, but they were not all completely satisfied. The reading-group members were happy with the design of the guide, particularly with the summary at the beginning. A fairly frequent criticism put forward by the readers was about the 'school-like' nature of the discussion questions, which often simply asked them to reproduce what they had read. In this context, 'school-like' should be interpreted as being too easy or as resembling an oral exam (for example, questions beginning: 'Explain ...'). Reading group members do not want their discussions to revolve around giving explanations (that is, they do not want to have to provide an interpretive, literary or literary-critical reading), but want to articulate what they think about a book themselves. They want to be encouraged to form their own opinions and start real discussions. For this reason, questions about the author's intentions, for example, were less popular. Another important point was the variation in the order of questions. The discussion questions are presented in a numbered list. If the questions are discussed in the suggested order, members of the group become frustrated by the similarities between the questions. It would be more effective if the order of the questions was shuffled around to generate a livelier and more varied discussion.

The observations and interviews also revealed that reading-group members are not keen on the literary or literary-critical ways of reading (Level 5 and Level 6). The reading guide should be easy for everyone to understand and should, for example, explain any literary jargon that it uses. This enables the members to find common ground, without the need to interrupt the discussion. In addition, readers indicated that the questions were helpful, as they often corresponded with the questions that they asked themselves while reading the novel. Readers were positive about questions that invited them to identify with a character from the story. They responded well to the recognizing way of reading (Level 2), which often prompts reflective discussion about what people think about the characters. All the reading groups were interested in the interpretative questions, as they encouraged readers to look for a deeper meaning in the novel they had read. They found these questions difficult, but acknowledged that they often took the discussions to a higher level.

The research resulted in several concrete recommendations for Senia. The main advice was to inform the authors of the reading guides about the possible differences in ways of reading connecting with the desires and expectations expressed by the readers in the course of our research. This would give them a chance to consider the types of question that best match a specific reading level when formulating the discussion questions. Another conclusion was that people found interpretative reading

challenging, but rewarding. The authors of the guides should put more emphasis on questions about literary concepts that correspond with the reflective reading level, but which could help readers to formulate their own interpretation.

Box 3: Societal partner: Public libraries

Many people involved in reading groups are members of a public library. Therefore, two groups of public libraries (Eemland and Groningen) also participated in the project. Both work closely together with Stichting Senia in providing reading groups for senior citizens, but their scope is, of course, wider.

The libraries in the Eemland group also work together with a women's organization and De Boekensalon (a community supported by public libraries themselves). Library Eemland offers these and unorganized reading groups packages around one book title, providing eight copies of the book and background information. The libraries in Groningen work together with Senia on starting new reading groups. Until recently, they also organized their own reading groups with a professional chairing the sessions. Both library groups also organize events around literature, and advise individual members and reading groups in their choices of books.

Reasons for participation: The public libraries participated in the project because they wish to gain insight into how their other activities and policies relate to the practice of reading groups, and into the practice and wishes of unknown reading groups for audiences other than senior citizens, in order to improve their service to their members.

Reviewing the discussion questions

In response to the findings of the research, Senia has revised the manual used to compile the reading guides. The revisions were phased in in 2012 and 2013. New students were given the new guidelines to use as a basis for formulating reading guides; authors who had written reading guides before were allowed to use their discretion in choosing whether or not to use the guidelines.

Senia considers it important to analyse the impact of the recommendations on the reading guides since 2013. A follow-up study has been set up to analyse the discussion questions in the new reading guides and to examine the changes, so as to identify possible points for improvement in the manuals used to write new guides (Laroo, 2015).

The new revised manual advises dividing the discussion questions into three sections: 'Your initial impression', 'The book in more detail' and 'Author, reader and society'. Authors are asked to add extra information in the discussion questions, so that readers know to which category the question belongs (for example: interpretation, theme and symbols, title and mottos, structure, time and space). All of these categories are mentioned at the beginning of the reading guide, making it easier for readers to look back and find the relevant information. The new design solves the 'problem' of the strict 'school-like' order in which the questions need to be answered.

Previous research showed that readers found questions that include the instruction 'explain' too 'school-like'. As a result, none of the questions in the guides written in 2013 and 2014 contain the word 'explain'. Most of the questions are explicitly designed to stimulate discussion. For example: 'Some reviews criticize this novel because it is too long. Do you agree?' As reading-group members inevitably have

different opinions, there is a good chance that a discussion will develop in response to such questions. There are more questions of this type: 'The story sometimes gives an account of the same event from three different perspectives. What do you think of this composition?' or 'What did you think of the graphic descriptions of the atrocities on the battlefield? Does this add anything to the novel or should it have been toned down?' So, generally speaking, the new reading guides set good questions, aimed at stimulating discussion between members of the reading groups.

Members of the reading groups did not like being made to feel as if they were taking an oral exam; they were not keen on the literary or literary-critical ways of reading either. In general, the reading guides compiled in 2013 and 2014 took this into account. However, there is still room for improvement, as shown in the following example: 'In the literature analysis, we come across the terms *Raffnung* (summing up long periods in a few sentences) and *Dehnung* (using several sentences to describe the details of one moment) for time acceleration and retardation respectively. The aim of both techniques is to create tension in the story. Which of these two techniques is used at the end of Chapter 8?' Here, two techniques are presented to the readers, who have to choose which has been used in a particular passage. Users of reading guides tend not to like questions such as this. Apart from making them feel as if they are taking an exam, they tend not to stimulate discussion. The question does, however, take a possible lack of literary knowledge into consideration by explaining what the terms mean. Having said this, it is still a question based on literary theory, to which there is only one correct answer.

Previous research had also shown that readers prefer not to identify with the author, an outcome that challenged the view of the researchers who expected that readers would normally engage with questions such as: 'Why do you think that author X decided to explore problem Y in his book?' However, the research clearly showed that readers did not appreciate this kind of question. They were more interested in how they related to the books as readers than they were in the relation between the book and the author, and therefore they suggested avoiding questions such as this in the guides, or to ask more open questions about the author's intention. However, this type of question still occurred, often posed as follows: 'It is unconventional to base a book on a film. Why do you think the author decided to do this?' However, better ways of asking this type of question were also found, for example: 'This author uses short, clear sentences and avoids descriptive language. Do you enjoy this style?' Readers indicated that they were happy with questions like this.

Senia certainly seems to have taken the recommendations for optimizing the reading guides and discussion questions seriously, and has used them to develop a new manual for compiling the guides. Because authors who had written guides in the past were given the option of not using the new manual, not all the reading guides had been optimized by 2014. All future guides will be given the new layout and design. Then it will be time to carry out a new study about how readers in reading groups are reacting to the new-style reading guides.

Reflection on the collaboration process

Community-based research can be performed in many ways, depending on the theme of the research, the partners involved and the method of collaboration. In the article so far we have elaborated on the theme and partners involved, and how theory and practice can be combined to enhance results. But it is also helpful to reflect on the method of collaboration.

In this case, we chose to involve the non-academic partners in the entire process and to set up several meetings to discuss expectations, research outlines, practical issues, results and the collaboration itself. This process started with a first meeting of the researchers and the non-academic partners in which we discussed the outline of the project, the concept of cultural transfer and the questions that were of interest to the partners, such as the increasing number of online reading groups and their ways of discussing books, or the different interests of reading groups focusing on a particular domain (history or philosophy, for example). In this meeting, the role of the non-academic partners as intermediaries between researchers and students, on the one hand, and readers on the other was fully agreed upon. In September 2014, an MA course in 'shared literature' began, with the participation of 20 students from various programmes within the Faculty of Arts. The students were explicitly informed about the importance of practical research nature for the course. They started out with a literature review. In Week 4, the students met with representatives of Senia and the public libraries. In this meeting, the partners introduced their organizations and presented their specific needs and questions in the field. This was followed by discussion rounds to explore the possibilities for various forms of study that could be performed by students in groups of two. In the following weeks, the students drew up their research plans. In doing so, they experienced the gap between theory and practice, because they had to combine practical questions and the literature being reviewed. In many cases, this led to first-draft plans that were outside the topic of cultural transfer or even outside the context of reading groups, which then had to be amended. In the second meeting with the partner organizations, the research outlines were presented and fine-tuned through feedback, and practical issues were addressed. During the research process, the students were in close contact with the organizations involved, which often improved questionnaires and provided good chances to observe reading groups and analyse documents. This also resulted in very high response rates (from 30 per cent up to 100 per cent), and reading-group members expressing their enthusiasm for participating. The approach in which students engaged with the reading practices of an elderly audience proved very successful, as the readers were eager to share their experiences and to contribute to the students' learning process.

The dynamics of students, non-academic partners and scholars overall led to a surprising variety of topics. This article focuses on the studies concerning reading guides, since these guides very clearly stimulate cultural transfer within reading groups and are the most obvious example of theory being put into practice. But all research involved both a theoretical and a practically useful component. For example, the study of reading groups on German literature focused also on the use of the German language as a possible impediment for cultural transfer. The study of reading groups in Dutch prisons explored the reasons why there are so few of these groups in the Netherlands and compared this with Belgium and England, where different approaches to this issue have been developed. Both studies resulted in new insights into the process of cultural transfer and offered practical advice about how to set up reading groups in different settings.

Presenting the results

In addition to the meetings before and during the research process, the research output was also presented in various forms to accommodate the interests of all parties involved. Towards the finalization of the research projects, the students presented their results orally. Feedback from the partners on that occasion gave a last chance to

enhance conclusions and recommendations. The Science Shop published all final case studies through an open-source website, and everyone involved in the research was informed of this by email or newsletter. Some of the participating reading groups also received paper copies of the reports. Apart from these detailed studies, we thought that there was a need for a comprehensible and concise book to bring together the theory and practical case studies. In October 2015, this book was presented at a final symposium for a broader audience of professionals and volunteers from public libraries and the Senia organization (Voorst, 2015). At this symposium, the scholars involved presented the theory and outline of the project, and three students briefly presented their own case study. In the second part of the programme, the students chaired group discussions on possibilities for practical implementation. Some examples of the questions discussed are: How can different types of readers be accommodated in the selection of book titles? What does the ideal reading guide look like? What services can a library offer to reading groups? How can we continue to challenge reading groups through reading guides over time? One of the suggestions in answer to the last question was to try to include a surprise in every reading guide, without losing the uniform format that has been developed. This suggestion has already been fed into the new reading guides for the next season. For example, one of the new reading guides introduces a philosophical theory of behaviour and asks the group to try to map this theory on to characters in the book and to discuss its usefulness in understanding their behaviour. In another reading guide, a small remark in a review is used to elicit a discussion on the mainly implicit criteria for literary prizes.

The last stage of presenting the results was a presentation to the reading groups directly in a workshop at the Senia annual Readers Day in November 2015. In the evaluation, readers showed that they could incorporate the theory and the practical consequences to their own situation, when one of them stated, 'Now I fully understand the variety of possibilities these discussion questions offer, depending on what type of reader you are.' Next to these publications and presentations aimed at a professional and lay public, the students also presented the results to the academic world at the PhD seminar 'Reading and Readerships: Evolutions of the literary experience', in January 2015 and in an article, thus bringing practice back to theory (Voorst, 2016). One of the important conclusions within the academic domain concerns the theory of cultural transfer, which, to date, has largely overlooked the active role of the reader in the process and should therefore be revised. The input of readers reflecting on the suitability and benefits of the reading guides, with particular attention to the discussion questions, has resulted in a different understanding of reading practices, which has helped the researchers to reconsider and further develop their understanding of cultural transfer.

We would be very interested in comparing our results to related projects in other countries, thus linking our project to 'the broader picture' (Hartley, 2001: 103) that Hartley (2001) and Long (2003) have explored in their studies by considering English-speaking reading groups in other European countries and other parts of the English-speaking world, such as North America and Australia. Our aspiration, therefore, is to establish contacts on an international level in order to initiate comparative research across borders. In such a project, we expect to be able to examine cross-cultural interests and to engage in a global conversation in which active and interactive readers are the leading edge. This could even include setting up international partnerships between reading groups and a form of action research by these groups.

Notes on the contributors

Jeanette den Toonder is Lecturer at the Department of European Languages and Cultures at the University of Groningen, where she teaches Literary Studies, focusing on French and francophone literatures. Her main research topics are: identity and expressions of the self, minority and migrant cultures, transculturality, cultural transfer and cross-cultural literary encounters.

Saskia Visser coordinates the Science Shop Language, Culture and Communication at the University of Groningen and is also policy officer for public engagement at the Faculty of Arts. The Science Shop encourages and assists students in Community Based Research in projects ranging from language learning to health communication and local history. In her work as a policy officer she stimulates staff to perform research with societal relevance, cooperate with societal organization and engage in outreach activities.

Sandra van Voorst is Lecturer of Contemporary Dutch Literature at the University of Groningen. Her research includes the professionalization and internationalization of the literary field in the twentieth century. She currently conducts research into 'shared literature', cultural transfer in reading groups, international literary translation flows, and reception and imaging of Dutch literature abroad.

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